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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, the rising number of divorces has resulted in large numbers of children lviing in one-parent homes. A review of the literature on the impact of divorce on children's psychosocial adjustment, cognitive development, school peformance, and sex role development revealed several interesting findings. Age of children at time of divorce, length of time elapsed since the divorce, parental stress, parental conflict, and the quality of the parent-child relationship were found to be important factors in children's adjustment. While some findings were relatively consistent, there was not enough consistency to make rigid conclusions about custody decisions based on the effects of divorce on children. The findings do suggest some considerations, however, which together with assessing the emotional characteristics of parent-child relations, have implications for custody decisions. Continued involvement of the father, free or open access between father and child, and a mutually supportive and cooperative co-parental relationship are important factors to look for in deciding what custody decisions would be conducive to the child's psychological adjustment. Joint custody is increasingly being awarded to divorcing parents due to more awareness of the importance of maintaining contact with both parents and there has been more attention given to the child's needs and requests rather than just emphasizing parents' requests in determining custody decisions. Five pages of references conclude the paper. (NB)

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# THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COURT CUSTODY CASES

BY

LYNN KHOE

CG 019365

A doctoral research paper submitted to
Rosemead School of Psychology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Psychology

La Mirada, California

1986

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# THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COURT CUSTODY CASES

Doctoral Research Paper
for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

ROSEMEAD SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

BIOLA UNIVERSITY

LYNN KHOE

1986

THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD CUSTODY CASES

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## Abstract

In the last decade, rising number of divorces has resulted in epidemic proportions of children living in one-parent homes. This paper will survey literature on the impact of divorce on children's psychosocial adjustment, cognitive development or school performance, and sex role development. Age of children at time of divorce, length of time elapsed since divorce, parental stress, parental conflict and the quality of the parent-child relationship were found to be important factors in children's adjustment. General principles are extracted from the literature review which have implications for child custody decisions.

## Effects of Divorce on Children and Implications for Child Custody Decisions

Divorce is becoming more and more a viable option for all segments of society. Statistics show a sharp rise in marital divorce which has resulted in more children living in one-parent families, usually with mother. By 1979, 17 percent of all children in the United States under six years old were not living with both parents (Easterlin, 1982) and the figure is likely to be higher now. Bane (1979) points out that, of the children growing up in the 1970's, about 30% will experience a parental divorce and another 15 to 20% will spend some time in a one-parent family due to death, separation, or unmarried motherhood. Children are likely to live in a single parent situation for an average of about five years. Approximately 80% of divorced people will remarry (Easterlin, 1981, Maag-Weigand, 1981). In view of these statistics, researchers have renewed interest in investigating the effects of living in one-parent homes on the child's psychosocial and cognitive development.

It is important that the reader not assume that a parental separation automatically creates a single-parent family. The range of experience for the child could go from an absolute loss of contact with the non-custodial

parent to no loss at all. It would be an oversimplification to refer to a "typical" single-parent family, because of the various types of lifestyles and social supports among single parent families. Mendes (1979) delineated five distinct parenting lifestyles associated with single-parent families: (1) "the sole executive," (2) "the auxiliary parent," (3) "the unrelated substitute," (4) "the related substitute," and (5) "the titular parent." The "sole executive" is described as a single custodial parent who shares one or more parental responsibilities with the noncustodial parent. The "auxiliary parent" is a single parent, noncustodial, who shares one or more parental responsibilities with an auxiliary parent not living with the family. The "unrelated substitute" is a person who lives with the custodial parent, is not related to the parent, but shares some parental functions, e.g., a live-in boyfriend. The "related substitute" is a blood or legal relative who takes on the parental role, although he or she is not the parent. The "titular parent" is a single parent who lives with the children, but has not taken the parental role, due to conditions such as alcoholism, drug addiction or psychosis.

Since existing studies have focused primarily on the more common "sole executive" and "auxiliary parent" parenting lifestyles, this paper will emphasize these two parenting lifestyles in looking at the effects of divorce

on children's psychosocial adjustment, and their cognitive and sex-role adjustment. Important factors contributing to children's adjustment will be examined, such as parental stress, which affects childrearing, age of children at time of divorce, length of time elapsed since divorce, parental conflict, and the parent-child relationship. Relevant research of the effects of these factors will be discussed to extrapolate principles found consistent and how they apply to child custody decisions.

## Impact of Divorce on Children's Psychosocial Adjustment

### Parent's Perceptions of Children's Adjustment

Most studies regarding children's adjustment to divorce gather data from the parents' perspective (Kurdek & Siesky, 1979; Robin, 1979; Schlesinger, 1981). Kurdek and Siesky (1979) gathered data from 74 single, divorced parents about the degree of conflict in the pre-separation period, their children's reactions to the news of the separation, their children's present attitude toward the divorce and their own estimation of the strengths their children had acquired as a result of adjusting to the divorce. These reports need to be viewed in light of the possibility that parents' perceptions of their child's adjustment may be affected by their own subjective feelings and biases in regards to their parenting. Two factors

need to be considered which undermine the generalizability and validity of the following findings. One is the nature of the biased sample (moderate income, well educated, willing to share information), and the other is the nature of the measures (retrospective and self-report questionnaires). In spite of these limitations, Kurdek and Siesky's (1979) conclusions warrant attention as they relate to children's adjustment:

1) A moderate degree of conflict precedes the separation.
2) Parents usually share in telling their children of their decision to divorce; if anyone does it alone, however, it is the mother. Very young children are often provided no explanation of the noncustodial parent's leaving.
3) Children vary widely in their reaction to the news of the divorce, some being actively negative whereas others are more subdued; children also show diversity in their behavior following a visit with the noncustodial parent, some showing no behavior changes whereas others display a range of both positive and negative emotions.
4) Children's adjusting to the divorce often results in changes in their school performance. Teachers need to be made aware of family circumstances in order to deal effectively and sensitively with

children whose parents are getting divorced.

5) In comparison to older children, younger children seem to experience greater difficulty in both accepting the permanence of the divorce decision and giving up hope for parental reconciliation. Older children, however, are more likely to indulge in some type of self-blame. Divorce groups with different-aged children could deal accordingly with these issues.

6) Most children do not experience conflict with regard to self-blame for the divorce, adjusting to the new family situation, visiting the noncustodial parent, and interacting with peers. Although it is very encouraging to see evidence that divorce is not necessarily a long-lasting process of emotional scarring, there are some children who do experience problems in the above areas. It would be most useful for community-based programs to both develop and offer programs to meet these needs.

7) Finally, despite the various problems encountered in children's adjusting to the divorce, parents definitely feel that such adjustment also results in the child's acquiring responsibilities and

> strengths; these, we feel, may facilitate the parent's adjusting to and accepting the single-parent role. (p. 14-15)

In general, studies of children in single-parent families have used small samples of white, middle class, urban families. Only a few have been longitudinal studies or have interviewed children directly. Yet, these studies are important to consider.

Children's Perceptions of Divorce and Their Adjustment

The child's perceptions of the complex events transpiring before, during and after the parental separation greatly influence how he or she is affected by the divorce. Since most studies on children's adjustment come from the parents' perspective, it is important to also consider what children feel about the divorce. One longitudinal study recorded conversations with 300 children of divorced parents in Canada (Troyer, 1979). Commonly expressed feelings included anger at the absent parent, sadness over the separation, and fear of rejection. Most children harbored a hope that the absent parent would come home or that someday they would look for and find the lost parent. They disliked the non-custodial parent's "buying their affection, and they did not want to be used as "pawns" in their parents' conflicts. They also considered it important to know why their parents

separated. Yet, Troyer observed that "a forced maturity, a self-reliance, was clear and ever present at some point and in some form in virtually all the taped conversations" (Troyer, 1979, cited in Schlesinger, p. 28). Similar maturity and responsibility were also reported by parents in Kurdek & Siesky's 1979 study. Their 1980 data from 132 children, however, displayed little evidence of self-blame for the divorce, hope for parental reconciliation, problems with peer relations, difficulty in accepting parents, or anti-marriage stances; whereas, Troyer's study found the presence of all these characteristics. It may be that Troyer's conversational interview picked up children's dissent more readily than Kurdek and Siesky's use of questionnaires.

As we have seen, the diversity of reactions children have to divorce lead us to believe that there are clusters of interrelated factors, all of which contribute to the child's adjustment. One cannot look at just one factor, such as fatherlessnes per se, as the single variable that accounts for differences between children of divorce and children of intact families. The most important factors that affect children's adjustment are parental stress (which include economic and social burdens), age of children at time of divorce, and time since divorce (Coletta, 1979, 1983;

Hetherington, 1983; Hunt & Hunt, 1977; Robin, 1979). Nelson & Vangen, 1971; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976; Hodges, Baum & Tierney, 1984). The next section of this review will look at families in a broader way by considering these factors that influence children's psychosocial adjustment. First we will look at the effects of parental stress.

Factors Contributing to Children's Psychosocial Adjustment

Parental Stress

Parental stress affects children's adjustment in that it affects parents' childrearing practices and quality of life. The common stress factors that emerged from numerous studies of single parent families include financial problems, child care, social life, parenting-homemaking, personal problems, and having to use community services (Coletta, 1979, 1983). All these factors contribute to the overall stress level of the single parent.

Particularly in single-parent families, the loss of income contributes to the problems associated with maintaining a household and raising a family. Coletta (1979, 1983) interviewed 72 mothers with various degrees of father absence, of income, and of number of children and sex of target child. The mothers of low income families reported more overall stress associated with living arrangements, employment, finances, and obtaining

community services. They also reported the lowest total satisfaction with their lives. After controlling for income, occupation, education, religion, ethnicity and the age, number, and sex of preschool children, childrearing practices did not vary as a function of father absence or presence. Rather, childrearing practices were related to the mother's total level of stress and satisfaction with child support. In other words, a divorced mother's dissatisfaction with the support received had a more powerful impact on her childrearing practices than did either stress factors or amount of support received, per se. The aspect of childrearing most affected by overall stress was restrictiveness. With greater total stress, mothers tended to be more demanding of their children in terms of obedience standards and child's self care. The divorced mother's satisfaction with childrearing influences her adjustment to the divorce, which then impacts the child's adjustment.

Along with the stress of the divorce process itself, other factors such as the degree of parental conflict, the age of the child at time of divorce, the length of time elapsed since the divorce and the quality of the parent-child relationship all affect the child's adjustment to the divorce. We will consider these factors in the following sections.

Age of Children at Time of Divorce

Research has shown that children experience crisis at the time of parental divorce and that the nature of the distress appears to be age specific.

Kurdek and Siesky (1979, 1980) found children's age to be a moderating variable in their reactions and adjustment. They reported that older children were more likely to 1) define divorce in terms of a psychological/emotional separation, 2) have been provided with a two-sided explanation of the divorce, 3) have reacted less negatively to the news of the divorce, the loss of the noncustodial parent, and the altered nature of the family system, 4) perceive the parents' separation as final, 5) report the absence of parental fighting as a beneficial consequence of the divorce, 6) share information about the divorce with friends, 7) possess perceptions of both parents that are realistic combinations of both positive and negative attributes, 8) report qualitative improvements in interactions with the noncustodial parents, and 9) acquire strengths and responsibilities as a result of the divorce. These characteristics held not only for older children, but also for younger children with an internal locus of control and high interpersonal knowledge, which enabled younger children to understand the parents' decision to divorce.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) started with 62 families and 112 children in their first study, with 101 children still involved in a five-year follow up study. In a one-year follow up, children's characteristic reactions to divorce were summarized according to their ages and developmental groups. The results are noted in table 1.

Table 1

Findings of Wallerstein and Kelly studies on Children in Divorce - One Year and Five-Year Follow Up (N = 112)

1) One-Year Follow-Up

| Age | Characteristic Reactions to Divorce |
|---|---|
| Preschool 2½ Years N = 34 | Preschool children were frightened, confused and blamed themselves. There was a great need for physical contact with adults. Children expressed fears of being sent away or being replaced. Only 5- and 6-year-olds were able to express feelings and to understand some of the divorce-related changes (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1975). |
| Early Latency 7-8 Years N = 26 | Children expressed feelings of sadness and loss, fear and insecurity. They felt abandoned and rejected, although they did not blame themselves. They had difficulty in expressing their anger toward their fathers. They felt angry at their mothers for sending the fathers away but were afraid of incurring their mothers' wrath. They held an intense desire for the reconciliation of their parents, believing that the family was "necessary for their safety and continued growth" (Kelly and Wallerstein, 1976). |
| Later Latency 9-10 Years N = 31 | Later latency children had a more realistic understanding of divorce and were better able to express their feelings of intense anger. They did not feel responsible for the divorce but were ashamed and morally outraged by their parents' behavior. Their loyalties were divided between the parents and they frequently felt lonely and rejected. They used age-appropriate coping mechanisms including a conscious layering of psychological functioning (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1976). |
| Adolescence 13-18 Years N = 21 | Adolescents were the most openly upset by the divorce. They expressed strong feelings of anger, sadness, shame and embarrassment. Divorce forced the adolescents to see their parents as individuals and to reassess their relationships with each parent. They also re-examined their own values and concepts about what is a good marital relationship. Most were able to disengage themselves from their parents' conflict by a year following the divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1974). |

2) Five-Year Follow-Up

*101 children*—34 percent of children are happy and thriving, 29 per cent are doing reasonably well, and 37 per cent are depressed (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

*Source:* Adopted from an original table in Longfellow (1979, Table 17-3, p. 301).

Note: Reprinted from "Children in One-Parent Families: A Review:" by B. Schlesinger, 1981, Conciliation Courts Review, 19(2), p. 27.

Robin (1979) in his review found that, in general, children were more severely affected if the divorce or separation occurred at an early age than at a later one. Although most studies would agree with this conclusion, some might question it. One such study is Jacobson's 1978 study, which found higher maladjustment in children in the 7 to 13 age group than in the 3 to 6 age group in the 12-month period following separation. He found that particularly in the 12-month period after separation, higher maladjustment was evidenced in the areas of aggression, inhibition, cognitive disability and overall severity level as measured on the Louisville Behavior Checklist. Possible explanations for these contradictory findings were given by the author: 1) older children have a stronger reaction to loss of father because of having had more years of contact with him, 2) latency-age children express their predominantly angry reaction to parental separation through acting out behaviors which are picked up by the Louisville Behavior Checklist whereas 3 to 6-year-olds' predominant reaction of "pervasive neediness" may be easier for parents to overlook, and 3) the Louisville Behavior Checklist does not adequately assess 3 to 6-year-olds' behavioral responses to parental separation.

Length of Time Elapsed Since Divorce

Along with children's ages at time of divorce, the length of time that has elapsed since the divorce also relate to their adjustment. In an earlier study done by

Wallerstein and Kelly (1976), nearly half of the preschool children deteriorated in functioning in the year following parental separation. Nevertheless, father-child relationships tended to improve over the first year, although it did not prevent the deterioration. Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1976) also completed a longitudinal study in which 48 divorced parents and their preschool children were followed for two years after the divorce, along with a group of 48 intact families. In all of the divorced families, at least one ex-spouse reported distress, disorganization, or exhibited disrupted behavior, which peaked at one year following divorce and returned to pre-divorce levels by two years following divorce. During the first year after divorce, children were more oppositional, aggressive, distractible and demanding than a comparable group of children from intact families. These findings were consistent with Jacobson's earlier-mentioned 1978 study, where children's psychosocial adjustment to parental separation was related to time lost with father within the first year period after the divorce.

Within a period of 2½ years after divorce, the more distant the time since the final separation, the more withdrawn the child (Hodges et al., 1984). At five years after divorce, depression in children was at a higher level than one year post-divorce for most

age levels (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The time since the divorce, however, may not be as good an indicator of the lenth of time of emotional turmoil for the child, which may have started before the parents' initial separation. We have seen thus far, that children's psychosocial adjustment is more severely affected by the age of the child at the time of the divorce (the younger the child, the greater the impact) and the length of time since the divorce (the longer the time, the more severe the impact), particularly in the first 2½ years after the divorce. Other important factors are the quality of the parent-child relationship and the degree of parental conflict, which are relevant to court custody decisions and will be discussed later. Let us now consider other effects of divorce on children, such as impact on sex role development and impact on cognitive development.

## Impact of Divorce on Sex Role Development

Related to children's psychosocial adjustment is sex-role development. Since during the crucial pre-Oedipal years the presence of a male role model has been found to be influential in children's adopting a sex-role identity, parental separation at an early age has implications for later sex-role development. This is particularly true in the case of boys' adopting a masculine identity.

Nelson and Vangen (1971, cited in Robin, 1979) and Hetherington (1973) reported that father-absent girls began dating at an early age and dated more frequently than father-present girls. Hetherington attributed her conclusion to the type and duration of father absence. She found that daughters of divorced mothers have higher proximity and attention-seeking behaviors toward males and have earlier sexual experiences. In contrast, adolescent girls whose fathers had died showed marked inhibition, rigidity, avoidance and restraint around males. Other research by Hunt and Hunt (1979) showed a differential effect of heterosexual behavior based on race. While both Black and White girls experienced a weaker sex-role identification than father-present girls of both races, White girls showed a more dramatic loss, and less increase in achievement than Black girls. One possible reason is that Black women have traditionally had to assume responsibility at an earlier age. Another reason may be that Black families have a more extended family system which include involvement of other male models in the lives of the children.

In boys, father absence has been linked to various deviations from the "normal" sex role development and behavior. It has been linked to homosexuality and varying degrees of cross-sex identity (Hilgar, Neuman & Fisk, 1960; Neubauer, 1960; Winch, 1949; all cited

in Biller, 1971). It has also been linked to less aggression in middle class males and more aggression in lower class males. Lower class males who came from divorced homes were more aggressive and less likely to delay gratification than those from intact families. They were particularly more aggressive than those who lost fathers due to deaths (Santrock, 1977).

As research has shown, there were greater female identification and more social adjustment problems for the father-absent boys than for father-present boys. These findings have been fairly consistent when studies have used White males. In contrast, there have been inconsistent results when studies have measured the self worth and sex-role development of Black males. Nevertheless, the effects of father absence point out the importance of having male role models in the home. Traditionally, there has been a greater lack of male role models than of female role models. Fathers with custody of children find it easier to fill up the maternal role by some other female relative or by hiring a female caretaker. Robin's 1979 review points out that in all but one of his cited cases, the absence of the mother resulted in the continued presence of a female figure in the home. On the other hand, divorced women with children historically fill up the paternal role only by remarriage. The presence of male figures, i.e., live-in

boyfriends, have been questionable as useful male models because the men often may not be nurturing.

## Impact of Divorce on School Performance and Cognitive Development

Research on the effect of father absence on cognitive development and school performance have been reviewed by Shinn (1978) and Robin (1979). In their summary of the literature they conclude that early father absence has a profoundly more negative effect on White middle or lower class children than Blacks and disadvantaged children in urban ghettos.

Studies of father absence among Black children have been inconsistent: some show detrimental effects of father absence whereas others show no effect or beneficial effects. Among Black fourth graders given achievement test, father absence was most detrimental to high IQ students (Sciara & Jantz, 1974, cited in Robin, 1979). However, the relationship between IQ and father absence is one which still needs to be established.

Studies of father absence among White children have been more consistent in their findings that children are affected adversely in their school performance. One study by Blanchard and Biller (1971) used four sample groups of 44 White, third grade boys who were matched for age, IQ, SES, and presence or

absence of male siblings. The four groups differed on degree of father availability: 1) father absent before age 5, 2) father absent after age 5, 3) father present but interacting with child less than 6 hours weekly, and 4) father present with more than 2 hours daily interaction with child. The authors found academic performance to be better when the father was more available. Santrock, 1972 (cited in Robin's 1979 review), found that father absence prior to age 5 was more disruptive to children's cognitive development than later father absence.

Most research has tested only the immediate effects of divorce on children's school performance (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976, 1980). The lack of longitudinal research examining immediate vs. long term cognitive development points to a need for more work in this area.

To summarize briefly, there seem to be a number of variables which affect a child's behavior after parental divorce: the age of the child at the onset of the divorce, the duration of father absence, the race and sex of the child, and the economic and social burdens which affect the quality of life that the child is provided. There is some criticism in the literature, however, as to the profitibility of this emphasis on the deficits of the child as a result of father absence. Some researchers have recommended that a focus on the parent-child and parent-parent interactions would give more information

on the developmental effects of divorce on the child (Ahrons, 1983; Pederson, 1976; Schlesinger, 1978). Next we well focus on the parental conflicts and quality of the parent-child relationship as it affects childrearing and children's adjustment to the divorce.

## Impact of Inter-parent Conflict

In a review of father-absence studies, Schlesinger (1978) suggested that children's adjustment is related more to the turmoil of the parental discord than to the absence of one parent. "Thus, unhappy, anxious, fearful, angry, arguing, hostile parents will produce problems in children of divorce...[whereas] a parent with positive social network supports of family and friends, and a satisfactory relationship to the ex-spouse, will enhance the adjustment of a child in the divorce" (Schlesinger, 1978, p. 26). Other studies also affirmed the importance of the interdependence and positive interaction of former spouses when both continue their parental roles after divorce (Hetherington et al., 1976; Tepp, 1983; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). These studies found that noncustodial fathers who discontinue or reduce their relationship with their children often do so because of conflictual interactions with their former spouses. Jacobson (1978) found that the effects of parental conflicts on a child's adjustment were worse when these conflicts occurred in the child's presence. He also found that a mutually supportive

and cooperative co-parental relationship, including the father's open access to the child, was condusive to better psychological adjustment in children, particularly during the first 12-month period after separation.

Still other studies claim that the quality of the parent-child relationship (e.g., degrees of warmth and permissiveness) was more predictive of the child's adjustment than was the inter-parental conflict (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hodges et al., 1984). The qualities of the relationship will be discussed in the next section.

Impact of Divorce on Mother-Child Relationship

Various factors determine how divorce affects the mother-child relationship: income, number of children, sex of child, and time spent with child. Attitudes toward children, childrearing, and satisfaction with post-divorce parenting are aspects of the mother-child relationship which are affected by these factors.

One caution in regards to our current knowledge in these areas is that generally studies have been based on the responses of women. The lack of data based on the responses of men which may be compared to data based on the responses of women makes it difficult to draw objective inferences about either the parent's relationship with the children or with the other

divorced spouse. One such study by Ahrons (1983) interviewed 54 pairs of ex-spouses one year after divorce. Comparative analyses of mothers' and fathers' perceptions revealed that mothers perceived fathers to be significantly less involved than fathers perceived themselves to be, and vice versa. Since most data are based on the responses of women, inferences that can be drawn regarding the mother-child relationship emphasize the mother's perspective, which may include distortions such as social desirability.

As discussed earlier, a mother's overall stress and her dissatisfaction with financial and social support have the greatest impact on her childrearing practices (Coletta, 1979). Inadequate income affects the time she can spend with her child, because she has to work outside the home. Two other factors are important influences to child-rearing: the number of children in the home and the sex of the child.

With more than one child in the household, more stress is involved for the mother in managing and raising a family (Bronfenbrenner & Henderson, 1977, cited in Coletta, 1979). Coletta (1979) found that mothers with two children were likely to respond more irritably and to let the children's demands for attention wait until a less pressured moment. Mothers were also more demanding about the children's self care and the

number of jobs the children were expected to do. With only one child, mothers were more likely to involve the child in her activity at the time, thus letting her finish her own tasks while simultaneously meeting the child's need for attention.

Research on divorced families reveal that it is considerably more difficult for mothers to raise sons than daughters (Biller, 1971; Hetherington et al., 1976), that mothers worry more about disciplining their sons (Coletta, 1979) and that they may compensate for the father's absence by disciplining them more harshly (Coletta, 1979). In Hetherington et al.'s 1976 study of 96 families, divorced parents, particularly mothers, used poor parenting with sons. They communicated less, were less affectionate, less consistent, and less lax in discipline toward sons than toward daughters. Mother-son interactions were especially problematic in that the sons were more dependent, disobedient, aggressive, whining, demanding, and unaffectionate than daughters in divorced families or than either sons or daughters in intact families.

In contrast to previous research, Coletta (1979) found that divorced mothers were neither overprotective nor were their children overdependent. Rather, when the divorced mothers were employed but had low income, they were more likely to promote independence in terms

of self-help in their children. Income was a key factor in that mothers at low income levels were more restrictive and demanding (i.e., in terms of obedience standards and expectations for the child's self care) than those at higher income levels. Mother generally became more demanding and restrictive of their children as the external factors (degree of social and financial support, income) in their lives became more negative.

Custodial mothers whose parental styles included warmth, clear rules, and verbal give and take had children who were well-adjusted and had high self-esteem. However, the direction of causal influence is not clear, since it is easier to be warm and permissive with well adjusted children. Custodial mothers who were laissez-faire in their parenting were correlated with poor adjustment in children (Hodges et al., 1984).

In general, there were inconsistent findings concerning the relationship between mother's involvement (presence or activity) with the children and children's adjustment. Jacobson (1978) did not find a consistent direction whereas Hetherington et al. (1976) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) found a strong relationship between preschooler's maladjustment and a decrease of mother's involvement with the child in nearly half of the total samples studied. These contradictory findings seem to indicate that some children become more

maladjusted with decreased mother's involvement whereas other children are more maladjusted with increased mother's involvement. A possible explanation for the latter group of children who were more maladjusted with increased mother's involvement may be that they can still function, adapt, and grow with the relationships of two adults, who, despite being in conflict, supplement each other when with the child. These children may have difficulty adjusting when the balance is upset by the father's availability being reduced and the mother's relationship becoming attentuated.

Crossman and Adam's (1980) data indicated that custodial mothers viewed themselves as remarkably involved and reasonably effective in their childrearing practices. These mothers reported child behaviors similar to those reported by non-divorce mothers on most of 91 items.

Impact of Divorce on Father-Child Relationship

Paternal involvement post-divorce varies widely. Some children experience a total loss of contact with father and other children experience litle loss of contact. In a self-report study, Tepp (1983) found six factors that influenced noncustodial father's continued paternal involvement in their children's lives after 3 years post-divorce: 1) father's feelings of competency in his role as father, 2) the quality of

the co-parental relationship, 3) the quality of the father-child relationship as reported by ex-wives, 4) his level of involvement in childrearing at one year post-divorce, 5) the ease with which he was able to see his children, and 6) his belief in the value of continued paternal involvement. The latter three factors and father's reported sense of responsibility to fulfill the paternal role were associated with more frequent visitations. Factors associated with less participation in childrearing or fewer visits were father's guilt about the divorce and the father's or mother's remarriage or involvement with another partner. The age of the child and number of children were not related to father's involvement in childrearing or frequency of visits. Surprisingly, there was no relationship between how often fathers saw their children and how involved they perceived themselves to be in childrearing. It was interesting to note that those fathers who felt highly involved in childrearing despite a low number of visits seemed to use denial and idealization in their descriptions of their relationships with their children, making such comments as "we never had bad visits," or "we never had problems" (Tepp, 1983, p. 1468). On the other hand, those fathers who had frequent visits but still felt uninvolved may be feeling the loss of day-to-day contact with their children. These fathers

reported feelings of guilt, obligation, estrangement, loss, sense of displacement or of being shut off, and decreased feelings of being special to their children. These feelings contributed to their difficulties in adjusting to the divorce. A common way to cope with these negative feelings was to withdraw from their relationship with the children (Moreland & Schwebel, 1984; Tepp, 1983).

There is considerably less literature on the lifestyle os single-parent noncustodial fathers. Two studies found that single-parent fathers maintained an active social life (Gasser & Taylor, cited in Moreland & Schwebel. 1984; Orthner, Brown & Ferguson, 1976).

The average social status level of custodial fathers, in contrast to custodial mothers, is above the norm (Orthner et al., 1976). This is not surprising, since for a father to win custody of minor children, the court, as well as peers and former spouse, must respect his resources and availability to the children.

With regards to differences in raising boys versus girls, 12 out of 20 custodial single fathers in Orthner et al.'s (1976) study felt boys and girls should be raised similarly, whereas 8 felt they should be raised differently. However, those with custody of daughters were more likely to believe in sex differences in socialization. In particular, they expressed a concern

about giving daughters an appropriate sex education. They also felt such problems were minor and perceived themselves to be generally successful in raising their daughters. This is a sensitive issue since judges rarely grant a father custody of a girl in a contested case.

Common problems mentioned by custodial fathers were lack of patience and time for their children, making decisions alone and having to be away from the children more than they want to be. They generally perceived themselves to demand more independence in their children than other parents might. In general, Orthner et al. (1976) concluded that single-parent fathers considered themselves capable, successful, and nurturing in their parental role, with problems similar to those experienced in most families. This finding was consistent with Davenport's 1980 study on differences between parents with and without custody in their attitudes toward children and childrearing.

In an attempt to measure children's perceptions of parents' parenting, twenty-nine chldren of custodial mothers were given the Schaefer's Child's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory and their ratings were compared to those of 30 children from intact families (Teleki, 1982). Results indicated that divorced fathers were perceived to be less restrictive than married

fathers and less restrictive than their custodial mothers. Consistent with this, children in divorced families saw their fathers as lower on Psychological Control and higher in Lax Discipline than did children from intact families.

## Implications for Child Custody Decisions

This survey of the literature has pointed out that while there are some findings that are relatively consistent, there was not enough consistency to make rigid conclusions about custody decisions based on the effects of divorce on children. They do suggest, some considerations, however, which together with assessing the emotional fit or temperamental characteristics of parent-child relations, have implications for custody decisions. As summarized in the Michigan Child Custody Act of 1970, "the capacity and disposition of competing parties to give the child love, affection, and guidance" is one criterion often quoted when making child custody decisions. A discussion of this criterion is outside the scope of this paper.

An attempt will be made to formulate some recommendations for child custody cases. Having surveyed relevant literature on the effects of divorce on children's psychosocial, cognitive, and sex-role development, the principles which can be considered

in custody cases are here stated in a general listing:

1. Studies support the importance of father presence for children within the first year after parental separation (Jacobson, 1978; Hetherington et al., 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

2. Minimizing parental conflict is conducive to the child's psychological adjustment (Jacobson, 1978; Hetherington et al., 1976, Schlesinger, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). If the child has strong bonds with both parents, he should be given as much opportunity as possible to see both parents in order to preserve bonds with both parents and not to develop internal conflict of divided loyalty.

3. The quality of the parent-child relationship affects the child's adjustment (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hodges et al., 1984). Custody decisions should consider the quality of the parent-child relationships and the emotional availability of each parent to the child.

4. The children's understanding the parents' decision to divorce helps them adjust to the divorce. Older children were more likely to adjust better than younger children, who may not have an internal locus of control and high interpersonal knowledge (Kurdek & Siesky, 1979, 1980; Robin, 1979, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Custody and visitation struggles often take years to settle in court, so children, particularly

younger children, need to be prepared, given adequate information as to why their parents are fighting over them, and given assurances of stability as much as possible.

5. Father absence hinders appropriate sex-role development of preschool boys (Biller, 1971; Hilgard et al., 1960; Neubauer, 1960; Robin, 1979; Winch, 1949). This points to the importance of having an appropriate male model, either through father custody or adequate visitation by father or other male figures such as an uncle or grandfather.

6. Father absence hinders sex-role identification in girls and correlates with more attention-seeking behaviors toward males and earlier sexual experiences (Hetherington, 1973; Hunt & Hunt, 1977; Nelson & Vangen, 1971; Robin, 1979). This may indicate a lack of a good model of a heterosexual relationship, which may be remedied by the daughter living near an aunt, uncle, or other couples with a good relationship.

In summary, continued involvement of the father, free or open access between father and child, and a mutually supportive and cooperative co-parental relationship are important factors to look for in deciding what custody decisions would be condusive to the child's psychological adjustment. More research

needs to be done which focuses directly on the child's adjustment, as well as on the co-parental relationship following divorce and the non-custodial parent-child relationship. Since there is no true single-parent family, research also needs to assess the impact of other parental figures and their varying degrees of involvement.

In light of the preceding literature survey, this section of the paper will expand on the questions that are important in deciding custody cases: 1) How can parental stress be minimized? 2) Which parent would be the more appropriate custodian for the child? and 3) What visitation rights should be given to the noncustodial parent. Let us now attempt to answer these questions.

The stress of parental separation can be minimized by considering the developmental needs of the child. As previous research has shown, the age of the children influences how they form relationships with and separate from their parents. The child's internal needs and relationship needs differ at different ages. Each stage of the child, e.g., oedipal, latency, pre-adolescence or early adolescence stage, have different characteristics of how the child relates to parents (Schreiber, 1983). As a general rule, children need stability and should maintain what has been good in their lives. At whatever

stage, continuing contact with both parents would most likely help the child work through the situational changes in his life that are complicated by his internal disruptions. Schreiber believes that children 2½ to 5 years of age, the oedipal child, need assurance that both parents are equally important and cared for, since they tend to perceive themselves responsible for the loss of the father more than children of any other age. He recommends that they live principally in one home to maintain continuity and stability. The latency child, aged 6 to 10, shifts his focus and energy from parents to peers and other activities. Schreiber feels that if a child has lived with one parent long enough to develop a solic image of that parent, perhaps a switch to the other parent's home for a year or so may help solidify his identification with the other parent. However, this can be counterproductive in that it disrupts the child's peer relationships. The preadolescent and early adolescent child, aged 11 to 14 years, form particularly staunch loyalties to one parent or another. At this age, hormonal changes cause a return to a self-preoccupation along with a critical refocusing on the parents. This refocusing becomes complicated and strained when one or both parents are antagonistic towards the other. Children's split loyalties also make it difficult for them to move back and forth

between antagonistic parents. Furthermore, at the ages when the child is forming his identity and self-concept by interacting with both parents, an abiding hatred or disrespect between parents can cantribute to his confusion and depression. This is because the part of himself that the child identifies with one parent is unacceptable to the other parent whom he also loves.

This points to the importance of maintaining connections with both parents. There needs to be a continual working at both parent-child relationships in addition to good will and good sense. Custody decisions can be based on the quality of the existing reltionship between mother and child and between father and child. The problem with judging the quality of the ties between the mother or father and the child is that angry, divorcing parents are apt to distort the image of their spouse. Each spouse may claim love, interest, and a need to protect the child from the other parent but in essence be using the child as a pawn to hurt the other spouse or to remedy their own guilt and shattered self esteem. Since parental conflicts have been shown to have adverse effects on children's adjustment, custody decisions need to facilitate cooperation of both parents. Typically, the longstanding difficulties which resulted in the divorce are intertwined with their claims for custody.

Such difficulties may include any kind of dysfunctional behaviors or pathological personality traits. These difficulties will affect how well they cooperate with each other in the task of parenting. Also, each parent has unique strengths and weaknesses corresponding to the child's needs. Assessing these strengths and weaknesses would be important in determining the emotional fit between parents and children. Therapists can make careful evaluations by interviewing parents alone, together, with the children, and with other significant persons such as neighbors, teachers, friends and relatives. This would be helpful in determining which parent would be a more appropriate custodian for the child. The critical issue is how well they can compromise with each other regarding the child's visitation rights in spite of their conflicts.

## Acceptance of Joint Custody

Joint custody is increasingly being awarded to divorcing parents due to more awareness of the importance of maintaining contact with both parents. Parents are also claiming their rights to continue their parental role. There has been more willingness to question old assumptions about sole custody, thus steering away from thinking in terms of "access" or "visiting," and a movement toward joint custody legislation. A California amendment which became effective January 1980 sets a

conditional presumption in that direction, stating that "it is public policy of this state to assure minor children of close and continuing contact with parents after the parents have separated or dissolved their marriage" (Green, 1983, p. 73).

Emphasis on the Child's Needs

There has also been more attention given to the child's needs and requests rather than just emphasizing parents' requests in determining custody decisions. Written at a Judicial District Court in Montana, "A Child's Rights to Parents" is a list of minimal expectations handed out to all divorcing parents in a district in Montana. In capsule form, the twelve "rights of the child" are:

1. A child needs a sense of security and minimal disruption. This means identifying a residence as a primary home.
2. A child needs access to both parents with no fear of reprisal.
3. A child needs discipline consistency.
4. A child needs both parents in developing sound educational, emotional, spiritual and physical well being.
5. A change needs contact to roots.
6. A child is not a hostage to be used as a lever to manipulate the ex-spouse.

7. A child needs his or her family forever. A divorce is between the parents, not parents and children.
8. A child needs to be a child and not assume adult, parent or absent spouse roles.
9. A child needs freedom from parents' guilts.
10. A child needs freedom from suicidal or homicidal threats.
11. A child does not need to be confused with new parent roles (step-parents).
12. A child needs to have priorities set so to assure the absent parent a proper involvement in their lives. ("A Child's Rights to Parents," 1982, pp. 81-82).

As further changes toward joint custody become legislated, it is hoped that these rights become activated as a result of more concern for the child's needs as well as the parents' needs and wishes.

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